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SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR DISCUSSES PRE-ELECTION ENVIRONMENT WITH  
KEY CIVIL SOCIETY LEADERS

Classified By: DEPUTY CHIEF OF MISSION DONALD LU PER 1.4(C,D).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: In an April 28 meeting, a group of key civil society leaders discussed the pre-election environment and briefed the Ambassador on their plans for the October 15 presidential election. The group believes that the media environment is the biggest problem in the pre-election environment but also pointed to a weak opposition as part of the problem, noting that civil society's role would be different if there were a viable opposition candidate. The group shared concerns that the GOAJ is no longer responsive to international pressure but agreed that engagement remained important. They agreed that economic reforms were necessary to create a viable climate for political reforms. END SUMMARY

¶2. (U) On April 28, the Ambassador met with a group of NGO leaders and political analysts to discuss the pre-election environment. This meeting was the first of a series of meetings the Ambassador will hold with representatives of democracy and human rights organizations and political analysts, between now and the October 15 presidential election. Participants in the April 28 discussion included Helsinki Citizens' Assembly Chair Arzu Abdullayeva, Foundation to Protect Women's Rights Novella Jafaroglu, Election Monitoring Center Executive Director Anar Mammadli, political analyst Ilgar Mammadov, and Human Rights Center of Azerbaijan Director Eldar Zeynalov.

PREPARING FOR TROUBLE  
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¶3. (C) Arzu Abdullayeva opened by briefing the Ambassador on the structure of the "Coordinating Advisory Council for Free and Fair Just Elections in Azerbaijan," an organization comprised of 55 NGOs and three "independent experts." She said that group was working on establishing connections with the more than 400 international NGOs which have consultative status with the Council of Europe. Abdullayeva said that the human rights activists already were considering their security for the period surrounding the election because of problems they faced during the 2003 presidential election, including "police attacks" on independent activists. According to Abdullayeva, the council will conduct a coordinated monitoring of the election, including a "mini" parallel vote tabulation. She said the human rights activists also would continue to monitor the overall situation and maintain an already-functioning hotline which citizens can call with human rights questions or reports of abuse. At present, Abdullayeva said the council was focused on raising awareness about citizens' role in the election, and planning voter education activities. Greater voter turnout, she explained, would diminish the GOAJ's chance of committing electoral fraud.

14. (C) Ilgar Mammadov stressed his concern that the GOAJ no longer responds to international pressure. While in the past, high-level visits and tough statements could affect some degree of change, he said that is no longer the case. Mammadov emphasized the need for a higher level of international pressure, stating that the GOAJ needed to face the threat of isolation from the international community in order to take steps towards reform. Mammadov saw no end in sight for the problems on the democracy and human rights front, particularly the media freedom situation. He does not believe that the GOAJ is pursuing a particular policy line through its actions; rather, he said the GOAJ is concerned only with enforcement. Mammadov fears that the GOAJ will do whatever it likes in the period surrounding the election, then point to the Armenian Government's actions during its presidential election and cry "double standards" if the West criticizes the GOAJ. He briefed the Ambassador on his plans to survey representatives of Azerbaijan's business community and develop a "national business agenda," which he would present to presidential candidates to seek their opinion. This, Mammadov hoped, would inspire a national debate and eventually improve Azerbaijan's business environment.

#### GOVERNMENT SMEAR CAMPAIGNS

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15. (C) Novella Jafaroglu criticized the GOAJ for its claims that the international community is using double standards in dealing with Azerbaijan and Armenia. She emphasized her disgust with the "smear campaigns" the GOAJ is conducting against prominent opposition leaders, particularly a documentary that recently aired on pro-government Lider TV attempting to discredit Popular Front Party Chair Ali Kerimli, using foul language and nudity, and public statements that Azadliq newspaper journalist Agil Khalil is

homosexual. This campaign is particularly dangerous, Jafaroglu said, because the vast majority of the population watches TV rather than getting its news from radio or newspapers. She said that in the past, opposition politicians could purchase television airtime even in the pre-election period, even on pro-government stations, but now it was far too expensive for most in the opposition to afford. Jafaroglu asked how it was possible to speak about a fair and free election when the environment is this bad only six months out. She solicited the Embassy's support to conduct pre-election activities in Azerbaijan's regions, noting that due to the interference of local authorities, it is becoming increasingly difficult for NGOs to conduct any activities in the regions.

16. (C) Eldar Zeynalov compared the GOAJ's attitude toward elections to Stalin's, stating that it was more important who counted the ballots and how they were counted than who voted and how they voted. Zeynalov expressed disappointment with the U.S. reaction to the 2005 parliamentary elections, noting that the human rights activists believe that the "major players" in the international community will accept any results in October's election. He said his organization would monitor the election, but saw no point in educating voters about the process and their rights because of the extensive problems in the pre-election environment. Zeynalov noted that presidential elections are outside the purview of the European Court of Human Rights, so Azerbaijanis had no hope of challenging election results. Freedom of expression is in a particularly terrible state, he said, referencing the arrests of journalists who had criticized public officials. Zeynalov saw a need for financial and political amnesty of persons imprisoned for politically motivated reasons. He concluded by rhetorically asking how Azerbaijan could integrate into international structures when its economy was based on a mafia mentality rather than a free market.

#### BLAMING THE OPPOSITION

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17. (C) Mammadov said that the real problem in this election will be the lack of viable candidates. If there were a

legitimate competition, he said, civil society's role would be much different. Mammadov labeled the GOAJ's "smear campaigns" on prominent opposition leaders as "attacks on potential candidates." He said this was intended to provoke them into participating, in order to make the election seem more legitimate because of multiple contenders. According to Mammadov, this is nothing new; the GOAJ has done this successfully in previous elections, he said. Abdullayeva chimed in: "How is it that the President, that the government can ignore all international recommendations?"

18. (C) Anar Mammadli said that Azerbaijan is currently in a state of political stagnation, due to citizens' lack of interest political participation. He said that regardless of the election's outcome, it was important to mobilize different groups to participate, such as women, youth, and NGOs. Mammadli shared his belief that releasing the imprisoned journalists would provide Azerbaijanis with some inspiration to participate in political activity, as would positively revising the electoral code or providing state support to the mass media. He said it was important for the GOAJ to include the public in the details of its discussions with the Council of Europe's Venice Commission on potential changes to the electoral code and the law on freedom of assembly. Mammadli explained that the Election Monitoring Center (EMC) was planning different methods of short- and long-term election monitoring, including a USG-funded parallel vote tabulation. He requested the Embassy's assistance in securing registration for EMC's observers, and echoed Jafaroglu's concerns about NGO's ability to conduct activities in the regions.

19. (C) According to Jafaroglu, some of the problems in the pre-election environment can be blamed on the opposition's unwillingness to participate. Regardless of the format of events, she said that participation was key. "They shouldn't behave like lawyers or kings; they should meddle in everything," she said. Mammadov added that in order to participate, an opposition had to exist first, blaming the current weak opposition on the economic situation. Because of the growing oil revenues, he said, society was overdependent on the GOAJ. Mammadov argued that economic reform was the key to political reform. He saw a five-year window to accomplish this; after that, he said, it would take much longer. Jafaroglu noted that prices are expected to increase imminently, which would create an unstable election climate. Agreeing that inflation was dangerous, Mammadov

said that the lack of fiscally conservative voices in Parliament contributed to the GOAJ's excessive spending. Zeynalov added that the GOAJ's foreign debt was worrisome, but Mammadov countered that it was not a problem; that the real problem remained government expenditures.

COMMENT

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110. (C) The group's concerns were not surprising and largely right on the mark, but it is discouraging that these key civil society leaders are going into an election with such a uniformly negative set of expectations. It is positive, however, that they are choosing to conduct their work despite the difficult operating environment. We will continue to solicit thoughts on the pre-election climate and suggestions for international involvement from other key civil society leaders, and will report septel.

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